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SCHOOL DAYS

I started school in January 1925, two months after I closed four. St Anthony's Boys was run by the nuns of the Sacred Heart as an annexe of the Good Shepherd Convent where all three of my sisters studied. I went through primary Classes A, B and C and Standard I at St Anthony's before moving - after a costly check - to St Joseph's European High School opposite. Now known more appropriately as St Joseph's Boys High School, it had been transferred to new buildings there in 1894 from St John's Hill where it had been started as a seminary and school thirty six years earlier. I spent the last eight years of my schooling there, including two spells as a boarder, and left in December 1936 after appearing for both the final examinations then available for matriculation. These were the Senior Cambridge, which was recognised throughout the British Empire, and the Bangalore High School, a local examination that called for a higher standard in mathematics and science and was recognised by the Madras University. Either gave one access to the college section next door.

The Good Shepherd complex and the three St Joseph's institutions (the School, the College and the Indian Section) lay on opposite sides of Residency Road, named for the British Residency that had once stood there. When it moved to another site in the 1800s, its compound was given over to St. Joseph's and Bishop Cotton's Girls to build their schools on, and the residence itself converted for use by the Imperial Bank of India. The road thus ran through a group of educational institutions in the heart of the cantonment that also included St Patrick's Cathedral with its Anglo-Indian orphanage at one end and Bishop Cotton's Boys at the other. There were other Anglo-Indian schools elsewhere in the cantonment: Baldwin Boys and Girls in Richmond Town, St Joseph's Convent

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and Clarence School on St John's Hill, and St John's itself where my mother had studied from her early childhood. Together they met a keen demand for education of the highest quality in a healthy and equable climate. Their boarding sections attracted many boys and girls, a few from as far away as Bombay and Delhi, though most came from the railway colonies of southern India, their journeys facilitated by the free passes that they were entitled to. Boarders usually outnumbered day-scholars, many of whom, like us, lived with their mothers or relatives while their fathers worked elsewhere.

Education, to our family, was almost as important as religion. As a child, I continually heard talk of my soon starting school and, of course, going on to college, and it was not long before I saw the three elder children leave home for university at Madras and New Delhi. Being away for long periods at a time, and so much older than I, they seemed to me to be of a different generation from the next three, who were still in school and whose ranks I was soon to join. I remember being fitted out for the event with the minimum number of shirts, shorts, shoes and stockings (why ever not socks which did not need to be folded over below the knee and held up by elastic garters or pieces of string?), and the ubiquitous khaki pith-hat or topee. We did not have any pre-school "familiarisation" sessions such as my grandchildren had many years later in Canberra, nor did I seem to need any, for with all the talk in the family about the joys of schooling, I was not at all nervous, and in fact looked forward to this new venture. My mother just put me on the back of her cycle, rode down past the police station on Museum Road and handed me over to Mother Mechtilde, the Head Nun. (Rules like those forbidding two on a bike were not for her, for being the mother of seven children seemed to give her special rights, and Richmond Town was a homely area where she was well known.) With a word of reassurance and a promise to be back for me in the afternoon, she rode off. When she did return, it was to see me leading the march-off from the playground, an early demonstration of self-confidence, a preference for outdoor activities over studies - and the seeds of future trouble.

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I loved school and never ran away home, as I remember some other boys doing. I enjoyed the story-telling and all hand-work in class, and the games and drills that took us outdoors. I was poor at “sums” but good at reading, and as I had an ear for music, I always joined in the singing, and I could never understand why I was not selected even for a silent part in our very first kindergarten musical, “The Wedding Of The Painted Doll”. (Much later I developed a tolerable bass voice that got me into my college quartet.) Though absent-minded and not good at remembering things (I can recall searching our class-room for my pith-hat at close of school one day, until my teacher pointed out, “It’s on your head, silly”!), I loved reciting poetry, though learning it by heart never seemed to improve my memory. And when it came to handwriting, I was the despair of my mentors until I turned ten or so, when it suddenly changed for the better. I have never forgotten my first teacher, Miss Henry, whom my son John met in London sixty years later. She told him she remembered me, which says something, I suppose, for the both of us.

On balance, I did poorly in class in my early school years. “Mischievous and never pays attention”, said one of my reports, a remark prompted by my being caught tickling a friend, Tommy Eaton, who shared a desk with me in Std I. “What are you doing, Eric Stracey?” asked Mother Mechtilde sternly, on hearing Tommy’s squeals. “Just feeling his bones, Mother”, I replied. “Feeling his bones” she retorted in mock disapproval, but I thought I saw her smile behind her rimless spectacles. In the event, my overall deficiencies led to my detention in Std I at promotion time. Losing a year at school was a serious matter that could have affected my whole future, but at the time I was less worried than disappointed at being left behind by my classmates who were about to leave for a boys school while I stayed behind under nuns. It was my mother who would have felt it most, for she would have realised its future effect on my life. Besides, she was intensely proud of her children, especially as Doreen, Pat and Ralph had already begun to shine. As a result of her urgent pleading with both the Principals concerned, the immediate danger was averted, for when school reopened after the summer holidays, I was granted the promotion I had missed four

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months earlier, and rejoined my old mates in Std II at St Joseph's Boys near-by.

But this late promotion actually entailed a set-back that affected my showing for a good few years thereafter. I found myself lagging behind the rest of my classmates who, of course, had progressed a full term in a higher standard while I had been repeating the first term in the lower one. Also, as time was to show, it was clear I was a slow starter, and trailing the class at this early stage of my learning made a bad situation worse. Though I was still good at reading, spelling, recitation and nature study, I found it impossible to catch up, particularly with the arithmetic that my mates were doing. Indeed, I fell even further behind. Despite my natural buoyancy I felt a touch of despair, especially when my sums repeatedly proved intractable. My other work suffered too, not least my handwriting which grew worse after we made the transition from printing to cursory script. This coincided with another transition, that from pencil to pen and ink. I did not have a fountain pen, and there were no biros in those days, so I had to use a pen-holder with a steel nib which I dipped in a small pot of ink that the school made from a purple powder bought from the bazaar. How it smudged my fingers and my exercise-books! Disheartened at first, I became mischievous in due course, causing my teachers to tell my mother I was a distraction to the rest of the class. She chided me and made me apply myself more to my work, helping me with extra sums at home and guiding my hand with her own to improve my writing. But I made only slow progress, and seldom moved up from the tail end of the class. This situation lasted until I passed my Middle School, after which I suddenly burgeoned to the point of being considered bright. I owe this transition less to my developing mind than to the spur of my mother's repeated reminders about "all those clever Brahmin boys" I would have to compete with if I wanted to come first in college.

Meanwhile there were compensations. I never failed to represent my class in recitation contests (elocution was then too big a word) which I invariably won, and on the stage, where I was usually given a major role in all inter-class dramatics and the annual school

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concert. The assembly-hall had a fine stage fitted with excellent drops and side-screens painted many years earlier by one of the school priests who was a gifted artist. Another priest translated Moliere and other French playwrights into English, thus giving both actors and audience a varied repertoire. And as he was a superb actor and director himself, and his charges were not without talent, our efforts on the boards were always well received. One play that I vividly remember was "The Upstart" in which I played an impertinent servant-boy. In one scene I had to laugh uncontrollably at my master who had draped himself out in unaccustomed finery and had succeeded only in making himself look comic. The most difficult part was making my first guffaw sound natural, for after that the laughter of the audience in response to each burst of mine carried me through, until I finally collapsed in mirth on one of my master's upholstered chairs.

I shall tell later of my outdoor activities and of the many satisfactions they gave me. Here I must mention having to walk to school. My mother stopped taking me on her cycle when my father bought his first and only horse and carriage, and after he sold them it became Shank's mare for us four younger ones. I was about seven then, still in St Anthony's while Cyril was in St Joseph's, and I used to accompany him up Convent Road for most of the way to school. He was a fast walker, and having to keep up with him gave me a long, quick stride which remained with me throughout my service days and which only a damaged knee has caused me to slacken in my seventies. We carried our lunch with us - sandwiches filled with cheese, egg or guava jelly, besides the usual plantain, our standard fruit, wrapped in brown-paper bags saved from our grocery shopping. Later, for some time after I joined Cyril at St Joseph's, our lunch was brought to us by a *chokra*, a servant-lad who carried our plates, spoons and forks wrapped in a napkin, and our rice, curry, dhals and foogarths in a tiffin-carrier. This ingenious contraption deserves description. It consisted of three or four round metal containers and a cover, each sitting exactly on top of the other to form a more or less dust-proof cylinder. The whole was held together by a handle that passed all the way down one side, across the bottom, and up the other

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through metal loops riveted to the containers, and was fitted with a hinged arrangement at the top that served as a handle even while holding the whole contraption firmly down. Ours was made of aluminium, though nowadays they come in stainless steel and are much in demand, not least by housewives in Bombay who feel it their duty to send their husbands hot lunches cooked at home to be eaten at office. (We brought one with us to Australia, just for the novelty.) The *chokra* was dispensed with when I grew old enough to go home for lunch, which meant a brisk twenty-minute walk each way unless I was lucky enough to be passed by a friend and be given a lift on his cycle.

Classes ran from Standards II to IX, culminating in the Senior Cambridge and Bangalore High School examinations. I sat for these shortly after I closed sixteen. Earlier we did the Bangalore Middle School in Std VII and the Junior Cambridge a year later. The former marked the end of schooling for some boys, for it provided a passable standard of literacy, including what is today called numeracy, and was all one needed to become, say, a cleaner in a railway loco-shed at twelve annas a day. For others, it provided good experience for the final public examinations that led to college. To accommodate the large number of pupils in each standard, every class was divided into two sections, A and B, each with its own classroom and teacher. The letters did not imply any derogation, for exactly the same subjects were taught in the two sections until the Middle School, after which one had to choose either the maths and science stream, or that which included such subjects as history, geography and physiology. I chose the former, for by then I had begun to do well in maths, (though rather less so in science). Compulsory till the end of both streams were arithmetic, Latin or French, and English, which included a thorough grounding in grammar, composition, analysis of sentences and syntax. We studied Scripture not under a priest but under a brilliant lay-teacher whose accent, unfortunately, left much to be desired. He taught it against a background of history, geography, literature and travel, which made it of absorbing interest to me. But even if he had concentrated more on the religious side, I doubt if he would have saved me from lapsing from the dogmatic side later.

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In Standards II, III and IV we were taught by ladies - Gertrude Dias and the sisters May and Dorothy Andrews, fine teachers of revered memory, - in classrooms built along their own passage that had a single access. I came under a male teacher for the first time in Std V. We soon learnt to call him "Sir", discarding the "Teacher" that we had used instead of "Miss" till then. But there was much more to the change than that. The transfer from female to male mentors, along with that to the all-male part of the school, was a signal to me that, at age eleven, I had started to grow up.

This fact was reinforced by two other major events in my life. I had become a boarder for the first time by then, and my father died just as I made the transition. The events were connected. He had been ill on and off since his retirement in 1927 and had had a major operation in 1930. The word cancer had not been mentioned in my presence, but I did know that the doctors had removed an unusual growth that the pathologist said was an undeveloped foetus that should have been my father's twin. Some months later he developed true cancer, and was advised to go to Madras for treatment. As my mother had to accompany him, and as Doreen, Pat and Ralph had left home by then, it was left to Margaret, Win and Cyril to run the house while I went in as a boarder. I did not understand why, but I suppose it was thought best for the priests to have charge of me during my parents' absence at Madras, for I was still doing badly in class and a touch of boarding-school discipline would do me good. It would also save me from the upsetting effects of knowing what all the others knew, that this was to be our father's final illness.

In August 1931 he came to the school to wish me goodbye. I was on the playground training for our annual sports when I saw him standing near the school bell, his hands laden with packets of Indian sweets - *dudh pedas*, *gulab jamuns* and *jelaibies* - that he knew I liked so much. He was dressed as usual in a neat cream tussore suit and brown boots, his eyes twinkling as he peered from behind his spectacles. I heard him asking, "Where is Eric Stracey?" and as I ran up I called out, "Here I am, Dad". We sat in the parlour and talked

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for a while, then he kissed me goodbye and drove off in a carriage. It was the last time I saw him on his feet. He left for Madras soon after to be treated by Dr Rangachari, then south India's most famous surgeon, but to no avail. Just before Christmas he was discharged into the care of his sister Adeline who lived in San Thome, a locality of Madras.

As soon as school closed for the holidays I was taken straight to Madras, for he was expected to die at any time. He was lying on a bed when I saw him, a mere skeleton, his temples sunken and his face just pale skin drawn tight over his skull, my mother and sister Doreen by his side. We took him home to Bangalore by train on a day when Madras was struck by torrential rain. Among those to see him off was an old friend, George DeSouza, who had somehow got drenched in the downpour. He knew of my father's poor finances and sought to ease his last anxieties as he said goodbye by promising to look after Cyril's future. In the event, he caught a chill from his soaking and died of pneumonia a few days before my father. He was a wealthy man who had already lent us money to help send Ralph to England to coach for the ICS, and it was left to others to rally around Cyril when the need arose some four years later.

At the station two British soldiers helped my father into his compartment by passing his stretcher through a window when it was found it would not take the corner from the door to the corridor. They traveled with us all the way, sharing our tea which was served at Katpadi Junction, twenty miles south of Chittoor where my father was born. He had done the trip many a time on his way to and from his districts, and told me the names of the stations we halted at, some of which I had to spell out. The soldiers laughed at names like Gudiyatham and Vaniyambadi, places their predecessors had marched through two hundred years before when fighting the Carnatic and Mysore Wars that laid the foundations for their empire. At home in Bangalore my father fell into spells of coma after receiving holy communion on Christmas Day. On New Year's night I was awoken and taken to his bedside where his hand was placed on my head. He may not have known it was I when he died shortly

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thereafter, and his last conscious moments would have been marked by acute anxiety for his family. It was my first experience of deep sorrow, but none was so inconsolable as Doreen, his special child and a doctor, who was desolate at being unable to save him. Of his seven children, only Pat and Ralph were not by his side at the time. His funeral cortege was the biggest Richmond Town had seen till then.

My mother had much to cope with at home after his death, so I went back as a boarder in the new year, but only for a single term. This coincided with my transfer from the care of lady teachers to that of masters in Std V. The first of these was a person who, for obvious reasons, was nicknamed Baldy. He soon discovered my limitations. When asked to divide £250 between A and B so that A got £50 more than B, I could not do it. He then introduced me to the value of simple logic and common sense - and caned me for my chronic carelessness which, as will be seen, was to remain with me for long. I next came under a Mr. O'Flynn, an ex-army schoolmaster (whose granddaughter I was to meet fifty years later when she was a doctor at Canberra's Calvary Hospital). He had a way of saying "Come up" whenever he intended to cane someone, and I heard the words often enough, which seemed to do me good, for I won a merit card for the first time in English history at a weekly test. This, however, proved an exception, for when I was fourteen and came to do my Middle School, the results showed I still had much leeway to make up. For though, with my usual overconfidence, I felt I had done well, I actually got (for the first and last time) a mere second class - this in spite of a clear prediction by a planchette, invoked for fun, that I would get a first! (My confidence in spirit media declined thereafter.) And had the tests been held a week later, I would not have passed at all. For not two days after my final paper, when cycling home from Sunday mass, I took a corner too wide while looking over my shoulder at a pretty girl and smashed into a lamp-post, breaking both bones above my right wrist.

But at sixteen and approaching my school finals, I was near the top of my class, thanks to coming under highly competent and devoted masters including Edward Davenport, a great all-rounder,

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“Smiler” D’Silva, he of the stern visage, and Richard Pereira, our science teacher who relaid my foundations in the subject. I got first class marks in all my High School papers except physics, of which more anon, and in the Senior Cambridge I would have “maxed” my arithmetic paper but for a very careless omission. As the questions appearing lower down the paper carried the higher marks, I started my answers from the bottom up. Having completed Q 1(b) which, of course, appeared at the end of Q 1, I handed in my paper, carelessly omitting to look further up and do Q 1(a), the easiest sum of the lot! It was not to be my last instance of serious negligence when sitting for an examination.

I made a pedestrian start in physics and chemistry, for the Swiss priest who gave me my first lessons in Std VII was himself in the process of learning English, and I was still somewhat slow of understanding, not the most propitious of combinations for a beginner. I therefore had a poor grounding in both the subjects, and not the best efforts of a lay-master in my last two years quite made up for it. Yet I found I had to offer one of the two for my High School finals. Despite his advice, I chose physics, for it had more maths in it and, frankly, I flunked the “practicals” in chemistry. I thought I had no chance of getting a first-class mark in either, and would have to settle for a mere pass. One had to sit for seven papers in the High School and pass in all of them. Failure in any one would have meant my having to do the whole year again, unless my results in the Cambridge pulled me through to college. But even for that, one needed a minimum number of credits which I was not fully sure of getting.

In the event, I came near to total failure in the High School through another piece of gross carelessness. One of the questions in physics involved tracing rays of light on a separate sheet of drawing-paper which, of course, had to be attached to the main paper containing the narrative, for the latter without the diagram would have made little sense to the examiner. In typical fashion, I forgot to attach it, and handed in only my narrative paper. The omission struck me some time later, long after the examination hall had closed

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for the day. I nevertheless dashed back, got the keys to the room and made a search for the drawing-paper containing the diagram, but to no avail. Everything had been gathered up and the hall swept clean. I awaited the outcome with real fear, and was not surprised but only greatly relieved to find, when the results came out, that I had got the very minimum mark for a pass in physics. I feel sure that the Board, seeing my good marks in all my other papers, gave me the required grace-marks to see me through. The overall first I got was a surprise bonus.

And here, to anticipate, I may tell the story of my final battle with physics (but not with carelessness). When I moved to college I offered maths and science for the Intermediate. This had not been without misgivings in view of my earlier poor showing in physics, but the alternatives were subjects like history and logic which I did not want. An older boy, Bobby Nicholas, a gifted sportsman and musician and a hero of mine, gave me a text-book written by an Indian Jesuit, a Fr Joseph. It set out all aspects of physics appropriate for my level so clearly that, guided by a competent lecturer, I had no difficulty with the subject thereafter. I made equal progress in chemistry, and got a first in both at the university finals, as in all my other subjects, but not before having to be rescued one last time from the consequences of my carelessness. In the examination in physics I thought I had correctly solved the first question, which again had to do with light-rays. It had seemed easy enough, but had contained a catch in the wording which I had missed, and so got the answer wrong. The invigilator, who happened to be my physics lecturer, spotted my mistake when he glanced at my paper as he walked past. He very sportingly drew an X with his finger against my answer. I read the question again, got it - and the answer - right this time, and left the hall, eternally grateful to my mentor who had so generously distinguished a careless student from a dull one. I include him in my thanksgiving to this day. And so ended my pursuit of classroom physics, but not my interest in science. My general reading has given me bare glimmerings of Einstein and Relativity, Plank and Quanta, and Heisenberg and Indeterminacy, but nothing of Design and

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Purpose behind the mindless cruelties and aberrations with which existence is beset. But I have outrun my school days.

My first spell as a boarder had come at the right time. Nearing eleven, I had been the centre of a large family long enough for the good effects of a close home-life to have taken hold. My elders had shown me much care and affection, but not overindulgence, and I grew up happy, secure and self-reliant. My character, which had been directed along moral, even religious, lines in which honesty, courage, self-restraint and consideration for others were important elements, had begun to mature. I had been influenced by enlightened talk, a cultured environment, good example and high family achievement which gave me a lot of pride (but also a somewhat snobbish and critical attitude). I was very happy that first time at boarding-school, partly, I regret to say, because it meant escape from the effects of my mother's severe tantrums. Even so, my immediate memory is of home-sickness made all the more acute by the nearness of my family in Rose Lane. I saw Cyril every day, for he still attended as a day-scholar, so it was my mother I missed most acutely. Depression, though I did not recognise it as such, would come on as I climbed into bed each night in "Small Dorm" where we younger boys slept. I would feel it, too, at Sunday evening benediction as the falling darkness and the plaintive Latin hymns combined to bring on melancholy thoughts of my being without my mother for ever some day. Not all the sweets and biscuits that she brought me on her visits could prevent the lump in my throat as she left for home.

But there was a happy compensation. Boarders were allowed to spend the last Saturday of every month with a local relative or family friend, and I lost no time making for home soon after mass on such mornings. Breakfast would be waiting for me - Quaker Oats, fried eggs with either Wall's Oxford sausages (our neighbourhood Muslim grocer would never stock the pork) or the wonderfully tasty spiced ones bought from Bangalore's famous piggery. There were old friends to look up and perhaps a quick game of cricket to play, followed by a lunch of pilau spread with slices of hard-boiled egg, cashew nuts, sultanas and strips of burnt onion which gave it a

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special flavour. Chicken curry with dhal and ghee, and papadams with fresh mint chutney completed the repast. A short rest, an afternoon movie with Cyril, and then it would be time to return to school. I would say goodbye to the family and leave, my depression lightened only slightly by the bottles of mango pickle and lime chutney that weighed my pockets down.

On one such day at home a stray dog wandered into the compound and had a fight with a fox-terrier owned by my aunt Win who happened to be visiting. Two days after I had returned to school, Cyril turned up with the news that the stray had been found to be rabid, and that every one who was at home that day would have to be inoculated. I grumbled at my bad luck - fourteen injections around the navel, even though none of us had been bitten! But I had to submit. I was picked up each morning and taken by carriage to Victoria Hospital in the city, the only place where the treatment was available. I took the first injection bravely enough, but completely lost my nerve for the second, and cried and kicked when the doctor approached me with the needle. Matters were not improved when my mother, just to show me how really little it hurt, jabbed me with a blunt hair-pin! It drew no blood, but it seems to have decided me. I submitted - and immediately felt ashamed when I found how easy it was to take. The lesson, too, was well taken. For many years later, needing a course of injections but with nobody at hand to give them to me, I was able to jab myself quite cold-bloodedly in the thigh each day and think nothing of it.

The regimen of boarding life did me a world of good. The daily awakening to the Angelus from the convent across the road even before our own at half past five every morning; the classroom discipline and tuition at the hands of an excellent staff of lay-masters; and the regular hours of study, play and prayer supervised by strict but mostly kindly priests, together ensured the continuation of my all-round improvement. (I use the word "mostly" advisedly, for there were significant exceptions. For instance, as part of my pursuit of French, I had had to cope with that *bete noir* of all beginners, the irregular verb. Deciding that I had not given it sufficient attention,

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the Swiss priest who taught me prescribed what he imagined was the best way of learning it - kneeling penitentially on a coir carpet! The pain and impression of the woven mat on my bare knees left a much more vivid memory than the vagaries of French grammar absorbed only partially by a distracted mind. On another occasion he caned me so severely that he rent my already threadbare pants, reducing me to tears of pain and shame. When I then went to the priest in charge of our dorm, another Swiss, to ask for the keys to the box-room to get a change of pants, he asked me how I had torn them. When I told him of the caning, he gave me the keys saying, "You should have got some more"! I took these beatings and those I got at home as a part of normal discipline, and I regret most deeply letting this notion enter into the upbringing of my own two sons. I would never have beaten them if I had been made to realise how wrong it was.)

My favourable transformation continued even more rapidly in my final years at school. The last eighteen months as a boarder undoubtedly relaid my earlier shaky foundations, opening the way to later success. In my very last term at school, with all outdoor activities behind me and only the last haul for the two crucial final examinations ahead, I wrote a letter to my mother who had by then returned from Burma and was living with Ralph in Kalimpong. It was, in part, a final accounting, and a favourable one. I was very near the top of my class and in the running for the prize for general proficiency. I had won the athletic championship for my division at our annual sports day, and the Victor Ludorum for the best all-round sportsman in the school. I still have her reply which read in part, "I cannot believe it is the same "baby son" whom I despaired of in the lower classes, and the lady teachers complaining of, who is now so high up and so good and ambitious, showing what metal he is made of. God bless you, my dear boy, and may you be a credit to your dear dead Dad and your mother, brothers and sisters. They are all proud of you." A few weeks later, with school closed and my examinations behind me, we were enjoying a family reunion at a Christmas camp in the jungles of Assam. Returning along a forest road on which I had been learning to drive Pat's car, an old Ford tourer which, lacking modern traffic indicators, required me to master

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hand-signals instead, I saw our postal peon approaching us on a cycle and waving a telegram. It was from Fr Collart, the Rector of St Joseph's, conveying my High School results and said, "Eric passed first class." There was joy all around and, on my part, great relief. My mother leaned over and kissed me, saying, "So you've combined both Pat and Ralph, I see." I did not think I quite deserved this, for Pat had been a superb all-round sportsman, and Ralph had regularly come first in class right from his early boyhood. Still, it made me proud to hear it, and it added greatly to my joy of life, already bubbling with the rising sap of my sixteen years, with another five in college ahead.

Though my studies thereafter were always to take precedence, my true field was outdoors. Ever since I could run I seem to recall challenging my friends to a race, catching or hitting a ball, jumping a ditch or climbing a tree. At convent we would race from the school porch to a tamarind tree near the grotto and back, and as Sports Day approached, we would sprint or jog along the grass verges of the quiet streets of Richmond Town or go to the Mud Tank ground for more special practice. Cyril and I would personally dig our jumping-pit at one end of our compound, using the tennis court - to its temporary detriment - for our run-up for the long and triple jumps, and from the go-down we would retrieve the high-jump posts that my father had made for the older boys years before I was born. On holidays we would take our ball and bat or hockey stick down to the Mud Tank ground for one game or other. We played hockey all year round, but soccer was reserved for the monsoon. When an extra heavy shower of rain turned the ground soft, we would switch to a sort of rugby, acquiring in the course of the game a most satisfying coat of mud on clothes and person. Cricket, the summer game, was my first and abiding love. I played it until I was forty five, using my shoulders and arms to compensate for my damaged wrist, which incidentally caused me to give up both hockey and tennis. I became a slogger rather than a stroke player, with never a high score to my credit. I did however learn to bowl a straight ball of good length, not very fast but steady, thus becoming a fairly reliable stock bowler and earning a fair share of wickets along the way. I was good at fielding,

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for I was fast on my feet, could throw well, and had a natural eye for catching a ball. All this, taken together, got me into the First XI in both school and college.

But it was in athletics that I made my most satisfying mark. I took part in as many events as I could every Sports Day, with a preference for the sprints, the jumps and the lighter throws. Though I came second often enough in the high hurdles, the pole vault and the 100 yards (meters were still not in use then), and won the 220 yards just once in school and again in college, by which time it had become the 200 meters, it was in the jumps that my long legs carried me through. But this was not before I learnt a painful lesson on my first Sports Day in 1929. I ran the 220 in bare feet, coming second, but by the afternoon, when it came to the 100 yards, I had developed large blisters under my big toes, and could manage only a third. It was the last time I competed without the right sort of shoes. At one time or other I held the school record in the high, the long, and the triple-jump, and the only time I lost a high jump was in my first year in college, once again through carelessness. Forgetting the rules, I attempted every jump at every height, while my rival passed the earlier ones. When we finally tied at the same height, he won the event on the score of his fewer total tries. (The next year I beat him by simply jumping higher.) Though I tended to be skinny and not very strong, I managed to win the cricket ball throw in school, and later the javelin throw at Loyola College, an event that I became good at.

I owed my success in sport less to talent than to training, however unscientific, for we did not have the benefit of coaches in those days. But most of all I owed it to the encouragement I got from my family. I had the example of all three of my brothers, Pat's, of course, being the most outstanding. There was my father to mend and mark our high-jump posts, Margaret and Win to tailor my track-shorts (white with a blue stripe down the side) and to attend and cheer me on, and my mother with her oft-repeated advice, "Just do your best and don't worry about the outcome", advice that I followed all my life and that saved me from pre-event jitters. I have only one

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regret. None of my family was present to see me receive my Victor Ludorum at school in 1936 or my championship at Loyola. I would dearly have liked them to have shared my pride, for it was to them that I owed much of my success.

I had an initial problem learning how to swim. About two years before I was born, when my father and the family were still all together at a place called Kurnool, one of Pat's school-friends who had been spending a holiday with them had drowned while out on a picnic. After that my mother had refused to let any of the family go near open water. To me, as I grew up, swimming seemed an attractive and enjoyable pastime, and besides, learning was obviously the safer course to take. However, it was not until the summer of 1933, when my mother was away in Assam nursing Cyril, who had had a serious attack of typhoid while holidaying with Pat, that I got my chance. I was a boy-scout by then, free from school for the summer holidays, when a Fr Gavan-Duffy, an Irish priest who ran an orphanage and seminary at Tindivanam near Pondicherry, invited our troop to camp there. The idea was to show his lads what scouting was about and to help them to start their own troop. I was one of those chosen to go, and at the end of a trek half-way up a hill on which the famous fort of Gingee stood, we pitched camp near a disused temple-tank. It was square in shape and lined on all four sides by granite steps that reached down to a well below water-level. The days were hot, the water, fed by a spring, was clean and cool, and I was enthusiastic. Helped by an older scout, I took my first strokes across one corner of the tank. More than the initial delight was the feeling of achievement. I gained confidence by swimming a wider corner each day, and on returning to Bangalore at the same time as my mother, I decided to persevere. But this was not easy, for there was her eye to evade at least until I could show her that I was past the stage of danger.

My subterfuge involved hiding my swimming-trunks in a garden hedge, and sneaking out for a quick dip when she was taking her afternoon nap. In this I was joined by two good friends, Ron Wimbush and Arthur LaFrenais. Riding three on a hired bike, we

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would cycle off to pools we knew to enjoy our swims in secret. At first this was at "The Quarries", some distance beyond the graveyard, where blasting for granite had left many a hollow in which rain-water collected. We put up with the slightly stagnant smell and the sharp edges of hidden rock that cut and scraped our feet, until we found a more pleasant place. This was what we called the "Five-Mile Well", further out of Bangalore and as good as any swimming-pool. It was shaped like a banjo, the frets being the granite steps that led down to the pool proper. The well itself was a circle of water forty feet across and almost as deep, and fed by a perennial spring that kept the water always clear and clean. I loved to dive, and it was a delight to toss in a piece of plate, wait until it began to disappear, then dive straight under it and watch it slowly flutter down, reflecting the diminishing light as I reached out to catch it deep under water. Later, when our school had built its own pool and one of our masters composed a bit of doggerel to commemorate its opening in which I took part, my mother was surprised, amused and reconciled to see one of its lines read, "There's Eric Stracey puffing like a porpoise in the sea"! Joyce, my wife-to-be, had at about the same time learnt to swim in the jungle pools of her father's districts. (Like my father, he was a forest officer.) When I first met her I tried the young swain's usual ploy of offering to teach her to swim - only to have her tell me that she already knew! When our own sons later came along, we lost no time in introducing them to a swimming pool.

I was too young ever to join the school platoon of the Auxiliary Force, though the British Staff Sergeant in charge once stretched a point and let me on to the range to fire my first rounds with a .303. In the meanwhile I settled for being a boy scout, joining our school troop soon after I closed ten and thus fulfilling a childhood longing. I passed from Tender Foot to First Class Scout, missed the coveted rank of King Scout by a single badge, but made it to the rank of Patrol Leader. Though I was not selected for the bugle band, another of my ambitions, I did learn to sound some of the calls I remembered from my childhood in Curley Street. More important, I was given my first lessons in drill and turn-out that were to stand me in good stead in my later life, which I spent mostly in uniform. But more

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than any other advantage was the further building up of character on the foundations laid by my family.

Our parents had trained us in basic good behaviour; not just in manners and dress (no gigolo's side-burns, no rings on our fingers, no pointed toes to our shoes), but in our relations with individuals and people at large. My mother had held up our father's honesty as the highest ideal to follow, and long before we heard the words ecology or symbiosis, he had told us that all living things, even wild ones, contributed to life and were mutually sustaining. He even thought that trees in their own way could feel pain. From our catechism we learnt the ten commandments and other injunctions, and on the games-field we learnt the importance of fair play, team spirit, obeying the rules and winning or losing like sportsmen. Our ten Scout Laws seemed to cap it all off (our jingle went, "Trusty, loyal and helpful, brotherly, courteous and kind, obedient, smiling and thrifty, and pure as the rustling wind" - and I was happy to learn recently that care for the environment has now been added). The sincerity with which, at our investiture, we promised on our honour to obey the scout laws impressed at least one young boy with the principles he would try to follow during the rest of his active life.

I enjoyed our Sunday afternoon troop excursions with their exercises in tracking, observation and endurance; our annual jamboree at the Residency with its inter-troop competitions in drill, first-aid and signalling; and our winter camps spent for a week in tents. These were usually pitched on Clarke's Farm or Hay's Estate which belonged to friends of our scout-master. There we played every type of scout game, revised our training, gathered brush-wood for our camp-fire every evening, and sang our scout songs around it at night. I loved the open air, and all these activities brought me in close touch with the outdoors, with which I was to have a lifelong and almost spiritual attachment. To "Staffy" James, our scout-master, I owe much gratitude for adding to my qualities of character and leadership which were to prove so valuable later in life. I still have my discharge certificate written by him in 1933 in which he described me as "an excellent instructor". It was an opinion echoed

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fifty years later in the memoirs of one of my officer-trainees recalling the days when I was Deputy Commandant of the Central Police Training College at Mt Abu. After referring to me as warm and outgoing, a cheerful extrovert, an eloquent speaker and an effective teacher, he concluded with the ultimate compliment, "We never went to sleep in his class"! Which, remembering their soporiferous state of mind induced by stiff, early-morning PT and parade followed by hot baths and heavy breakfasts, was compliment indeed.

All this took place as I was going through that special stage known as growing up. This transition from early adolescence to young manhood, when all things seemed to combine to increase my joy of life, was a wondrous experience. I vividly remember the particular period of four euphoric years - my last two in school, the next two in college, - spent in Bangalore, with its delightful climate and wholesome pastimes which added so much to my feeling of well-being. Far from finding adolescence the difficult period it is constantly described today, to me it was one of vitality, zest and fulfillment. As my chronic backwardness fell behind me, I cannot say I felt any relief from doubt or depression, for truth to tell, I was always too carefree to have suffered much from either. The worst that I can remember of this part of my youth was feeling highly self-conscious about my height, my skinny arms and legs, and my mouth that I thought too large for my narrow head. Only this can explain why, when I was beginning to see girls in a new and interesting light, I should have thought that every one of them who passed me saw me as I saw myself. I started to walk with a stoop, unconsciously hoping, I suppose, that it would diminish my gawky appearance, until my sister Margaret told me firmly to pull my shoulders back, push out my chest, and stop walking pigeon-toed!

And yet in other ways, I was far from shy. The opposite, rather, for I was at ease in company and spoke freely, even precociously, to both grown-ups and equals, and was, in fact, altogether too talkative for my age. This trait, combined with my cheek and my lip, got me into more than one fight with bigger boys, invariably to my cost. One set-to that I have never forgotten was with a tough lad named

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Tony Barrett. After some initial sparring, he struck me a swinging blow, not with his closed fist but vilely with his open palm over the ear. The pressure and singing in my head it caused literally knocked me silly, forcing me to give up. Another was with a big classmate named Francis DeSouza. It ended with a huge upper-cut to my solar plexus which knocked me out for a minute. I came to, with a friend rubbing my stomach in some alarm and asking, unnecessarily, if it hurt.

But there were other times when I did not show the same sort of courage. Once, at our scout camp in Gingee, I was put on sentry duty all by myself at an outlying post. The country was wild and hilly, strewn with rocks and bushes, and as dusk began to fall, I began to think I saw a panther, not uncommon in those parts, lurking somewhere in the bush. The impression grew as darkness fell and I became more and more afraid, until my imagination finally got the better of me and I ran in panic for the guard-tent. I was duly and severely chastised for deserting my post, and I do not know if my mere twelve years was sufficient extenuation for my loss of self-control. On another occasion I showed a more shameful lack of moral courage when I let a classmate take the blame - and two cuts - for the minor misdemeanour of clipping the lab-boy behind the ear with my pea-shooter. It was something I could have owned to without loss of, indeed with enhanced, standing in the eyes of my teacher, and I have ever been sorry I did not own up. Later in life there were occasions that called for both physical and moral courage, and anyone reading my police memoirs may agree that, in a service that was not without its hazards, I made up at least partly for these boyhood lapses. As a police leader, most of my work involved the just exercise of discretion and authority, often in the face of sinister opposition from powerful politicians and superiors, and I would like to think that despite such pressures I fulfilled this duty if not always faultlessly at least fearlessly.

One unhappy feature of boarding life at St Joseph's was the division between first and second class boarders according to the fees they paid. First class boarders were charged about thirty rupees a

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month, the others twenty. The difference of ten rupees (less than fifty Australian cents today) was then quite substantial, and even though, in view of my father's pension, I was quite willing to go into the second class, the Principal, without our asking, unaccountably gave me a scholarship of ten rupees and put me in the first, a favour that was repeated when I went in for a second time after we broke up home. I do not know the reason for this; perhaps it was out of some consideration for the Stracey name and family. Whatever the reason, it was certainly of help to Pat and Doreen, who by the time I passed out were still struggling to support the family. The difference in treatment was more nominal than real, but it could have had a bad psychological effect on some boys. There were separate dormitories for each class, and their dining-tables were set slightly apart in the refectory. We were served tea in cups, the others in bowls. All got the same quantity of food of the same sort, except that we got a special cube of coconut sweet after lunch and dinner. The very rich boys, mostly Parsis from Bombay, paid much more, and were admitted as Parlour boarders. They had their own small dining-room separate from the rest of us, and their own special menu. Overall, it was an objectionable system, and it is good that it no longer exists. For with the availability of good schooling almost everywhere now, the need for boarding-sections has generally ceased except in orphanages and schools catering for expatriates.

My better memories by far are of good companions and widening friendships. My mother's saying, "Show me your friends and I'll tell you what you are" must have sunk in, for both by choice and good fortune, in my last years in school and later at university, I fell into company of the best sort. At this important time of my development, I found myself among a group of decent friends whose influence on each other was all to the good. Old fashioned values still prevailed. Girls were respected, and playing the game was at least as important as winning and, unlike today, quite untainted by money. Our unhappy expression, "Don't play a pariah's game" summed up our attitude to sport. I walked the Quad in my spare time with friends who were both bright and well-behaved and avoided

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vulgar talk, and I was fortunate to fall into similar company, mixed this time, when I went to college.

The priests in school were understanding and allowed us small liberties which let us feel grown-up. In my last year, we were permitted to go out for a hair-cut at a regular saloon on nearby Brigade Road instead of queuing up on a Sunday morning for a crop by the school barber. We were also allowed to go to the matinee show of a suitable film on a holiday afternoon. I would like to say that in return for these indulgences our behaviour remained impeccable, but sad to say, we occasionally “bunked”, especially when we felt like a visit to the Brahmin cafe down the road. There we could feast on delicious *dosai* and *iddli*, those mouth-watering rice-flour savouries better tasted than described, followed by at least two sweet *gulab jamuns*, hot from the pan, the whole costing us four annas, my pocket-money for the week! Worse, having once been tempted to try the noxious weed behind the wall that screened what we inelegantly called the “bogs”, I fear I got hooked. I gave it up for good after a heart attack at fifty one.

But peccadilloes or mortal sins, I have no doubt that this was the most important period of my development not just of mind and body but especially of character. The Church played its part. Sacraments, rituals and devotions were, I was told, good for me, so I observed them. I loved the beauty of our chapel altar and enjoyed singing in the choir. I accepted the tenets of the Church at the time, more, I confess, out of respect for the good priests who were our mentors than from any depth of faith, and I still follow its moral principles, as I do the ethics learnt from my readings of other religions. But it was with no great difficulty that I abjured its central *dogma* once I perceived what to me was its irremediable absurdity and self-contradiction: a god of love, a god who *is* love, that requires the sacrificial blood of his only and well-beloved son to move him to forgiveness. Another item of dogma that I could not digest was the Mystery of the Holy Trinity. A First Person who purported to be the Father of a Second Person who was actually conceived by a Third Person seems to me to call for the application of Occam’s Razor.

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Remove these fundamental planks, and the rest of its dogma, but not its morals or spirituality, is, to me, irrelevant and superfluous.